Democracy's Conceptual Politics: Liberalism and Its Others

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► **Abstract:** The language we use for democracy matters, the struggles over how it is defined are real, the outcomes are consequential. This is what a conceptual politics approach emphasizes, pointing to the vital role played by contestation in determining which meanings prevail and which are marginalized. Among all the meanings of democracy that exist, it is liberal democracy that stands at the center, it has effectively won conceptual and political battles resulting in its current primacy. In this sense, liberalism is much more deeply baked into contemporary discussions about democracy than some might be comfortable admitting. This is not without cause, as liberal democracy has achieved, and continues to unevenly provide, political, economic, and social goods. In the rush to dig up alternatives, it is important not to lose sight of how and why this liberal conception of democracy has come to dominate and the ways it conditions democratic possibilities.

► **Keywords:** conceptual politics, crisis of democracy, democratization, history of democracy, liberalism, liberal democracy

What is Democracy; this huge inevitable Product of the Destinies, which is everywhere the portion of our Europe in these latter days? There lies the question for us. Whence comes it, this universal big black Democracy; whither tends it; what is the meaning of it? (Carlyle 1850: 13)

When Thomas Carlyle asked this question shortly after the upheavals of 1848, he was reacting to the remarkable changes flowing from the American and French Revolutions. Like many other contemporaries, he was trying to make sense of a new political force, a long dormant idea from ancient Greece that had then emerged as a potent challenger, and increasingly heir apparent, to the *ancien régime* monarchies that dominated Europe. At that moment, conceptions of democracy were inchoate; it was not yet clear how it could be translated into a viable form of rule for nation-states. In time, this uncertainty was resolved with the development of liberal democracy, which proved to be remarkably effective at translating the ancient idea into a political-economic form matched for a modern world composed of sovereign states.

Today there is much greater understanding about what democracy is, where it has existed, and what forms it can take. The result is a more detailed picture, filled out through democratic governance being adopted around the world, and greater appreciation of its much more complex lineage, one that goes well beyond the limited confines of Western Europe and the Anglosphere (Keane 2009). This has been attended by attempts to identify, measure, compare, interpret and value different democratic forms and experiences, reflected in the considerable scholarship on democracy in political theory and comparative politics. Despite all this work, Carlyle's questions still hang in the air: "What is Democracy? . . . What is the meaning of it?" Perhaps they can never be fully answered. "No theory can ever be adequate to the experience of democratic politics," reflects Alan Keenan, "rather than providing answers, democracy leaves us with a permanent set of questions" (Keenan 2003: 28). There is something remarkable, intangible in democracy's multivalent character that evades easy comprehension or comfortable resolution, bedeviling thought and inspiring action.

Democracy, both empirically and normatively, consistently excludes our analytical grasps. Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that Jean-Paul Gagnon could find such a wealth of descriptors of democracy (Gagnon 2018b). Connecting this to the special issue's focus on marginalized meanings of democracy, a rather crude – but not wholly unjustified – response would be that most are marginalized for good cause: they have been of limited consequence or use. It has been far from an equal playing field; there is a kind of a power law at work when it comes to meanings of democracy. A handful of conceptions have proven far more consequential than the rest combined, with one in particular – liberal democracy – coming to dominate how democracy is understood and practiced. Without denying the value of the lexical approach set out in the introduction, there is a risk of flattening out these considerable differences that exist. Responding to this, the conceptual politics framework presented in this article is a way of inserting contestation and struggles for power into discussions about different meanings of democracy, thereby offering insight into why some conceptions have been more consequential and others have been marginalized. This approach considers how "key concepts are debated, transposed and imposed, and how these outcomes impact upon, and help shape, reality" (Hobson and Kurki 2012: 4). Simply put, the manner in which these dynamics unfold is much closer to Nietzsche than Habermas.

That we are busy manufacturing new descriptors, searching for different subtypes, scouring history for forgotten practices, these all reflect the political and normative strength that continues to inhere in the basic

concept of democracy. For better and worse, this outcome is closely tied to liberal democracy, which has become the dominant manifestation of the democratic idea in the modern world. Moving past the polemics, one of the reasons that Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis gained so much traction was that beneath all the hubris there was a kernel of truth: liberal democracy had effectively seen off its great ideational challengers and, at the end of the twentieth century, it was still standing. This did have historical significance (Fukuyama 1989; 1992). In the rush to dig up alternatives, it is important not to lose sight of how and why this liberal conception of democracy has come to dominate and how this now conditions democratic possibilities.

The argument developed here places concerns over democracy's present standing and functioning in a different perspective. Considering marginalized meanings of democracy could help identify ideas and practices that have contemporary relevance. Conversely, it might also offer a reminder of why certain conceptions have come to dominate and how these might influence what democratic futures are open to us. Liberal democracy may have lost some of its luster and appeal, but beneath its faded exterior, one can still identify some of the features that have given it resilience and value. Its track record should not, however, give us misplaced confidence that all is fine in the world of "real-existing democracy," to pick out Philippe Schmitter's term from Gagnon's extensive list (Schmitter 2011). The problems that liberal democracy must resolve are manifest and multiple, and it is far from clear it has the capacity to overcome them (Runciman 2018). At present, however, the challenge is less one of peer competitors and more one of liberal democracy becoming increasingly hollow and ineffective, being less able to deliver on its promise (Brown 2015). Digging out forgotten conceptions of democracy might help with addressing this situation, but it might not; there is no inherent reason for thinking that persuasive answers can be found amidst the meanings that have fallen into disuse or proven irrelevant.

With these cautions in mind, the article first outlines and develops a conceptual politics approach and then applies it to thinking about democracy. This framework suggests that certain conceptions of democracy do matter more and are historically more significant, while many marginalized meanings were marginal, or marginalized, because they failed to be politically relevant in the contexts they appeared or were used. Fundamental in democracy coming to be descriptively revised and normatively revalued was its reconciliation with liberalism. From this perspective, it is not without cause that the liberal model remains at the center of how democracy is thought about and practiced, and thinking

through democracy's present positioning and potential future means carefully reckoning with this historical trajectory.

Conceptual Politics

Democracy is a particularly slippery concept. It should not be surprising that it is so often used, abused, and fought over, given that it is so closely connected to politics, a field defined by contestation. Within this context, a conceptual politics framework can offer insight into why certain understandings of democracy have prevailed, or have been more prevalent at certain moments, and on the flipside, why other meanings have been marginalized or fallen into disuse. A conceptual politics approach “describes the ways in which contested concepts . . . are interpreted, used, and fought over by actors, and how certain meanings and definitions come to influence real world phenomena” (Hobson and Kurki 2012: 3). This rests on a fundamental assumption that concepts matter, which builds on social constructivist approaches that emphasize the role played by language, norms, and shared beliefs in building up the world in which people act (Ish-Shalom 2021).

Setting out this position, Charles Taylor dismisses “the artificiality of the distinction between social reality and the language of description of that social reality,” as “language is constitutive of the reality, is essential to its being the kind of reality it is” (Taylor 1971: 24). The world is not reducible to words, but language unavoidably mediates how we understand, engage, and make sense of it. Shared conceptions and standards shape—but do not determine—how meaning is created, conveyed, contested, changed. As James Boyd-White suggests, “language is not stable but changing and that it is perpetually remade by its speakers, who are themselves remade, both as individuals and as communities, in what they say” (Boyd-White 1984: x). Put differently, using different concepts and alternate conceptions gives shape to different realities and alternate possibilities.

Building on the assumption that language mediates our engagement with the world, concepts occupy a central role, acting as constellations that bring together different ideas and meanings into a cohesive whole. Concepts play a key part in shaping social practices and structures, and there is an interplay between conceptual contestation and real-world change. In recognizing the crucial part played by concepts in language, it is also important to note that not all concepts are equally significant. A conceptual politics framework focuses on basic concepts, the ones that are most politically consequential, which are pivots around which

political discourse operates and agency occurs (Koselleck 1996). Through studying basic concepts, a direct route is offered to understanding larger political and societal changes, which are predicated or attended by conceptual shifts.

The way certain concepts are understood, what ideas and practices they are associated with and describe, and those they are contrasted against, these all give meaning and shape to specific political projects and enable certain types of action. As Piki Ish-Shalom explains, “conceptualizing concepts means conceptualizing the world around us, fashioning an understanding of the world *and* ways to act in the world to achieve our goals” (Ish-Shalom 2021: 9). To the extent that concepts help to constitute the reality inhabited by these actors, such conceptual shifts can alter the nature of the political and social realm within which they operate.

Contestation is another distinguishing feature of conceptual politics. This point has been most influentially made by W. B. Gallie with his notion of “essentially contested concepts” (Gallie 1964). Unfortunately, Gallie’s insight has become banalized within academic discourse, resulting in everything and anything being deemed as “essentially contested.” Insofar as concepts are human and social constructions, that they can take on different and competing meanings is in itself not especially noteworthy. A simplistic version of Gallie’s argument ends up stating the obvious – something political involves contestation – while missing the more important point, namely, that there are specific moments when contestation over a concept’s meaning sharpens and heightens, and how that is resolved is politically consequential.

The lazy habit of trivializing conceptual contestation as “essential” means losing an important marker for identifying significant developments. Rather, by identifying and recognizing moments when basic concepts become battlegrounds for different conceptions of how to do politics and structure society, one opens the possibility of gaining insight to how and why change is occurring. Indeed, there may be periods where a dominant understanding of a concept prevails and there is limited contestation. This was the case with democracy; for a long time, there was a strong consensus that it was an outdated and inappropriate form of rule (Roberts 1994). Recognizing this, what is important is appreciating when and how democracy again became a source of conflict, a battle word, and what changes followed from that.

The highly political nature of concepts means they develop in a somewhat haphazard and unplanned fashion through contestation and struggle. What concepts or conceptualizations prove politically relevant and successful at specific moments helps shape what might follow. The historical trajectory of a concept does not determine the outcome of later

contestation, but it does forestall some possibilities, while making others more likely. As Terence Ball observes, “the language we now speak is the result of the most long-lived and successful of those earlier attempts at conceptual revision” (Ball 1988: 6). In this sense, concepts have a weak kind of path dependency to them. Another feature that marks basic concepts is demarcation and separation, whereby meanings are distinguished against one another. Relevant here is Reinhart Koselleck’s formulation of counter-concepts, which operate in a co-constitutive fashion: in reflecting each other, they help to define themselves (Koselleck 1985: chap. 10). This perspective is one with debts to Nietzsche and Schmitt; it is an understanding of history in which power and contingency explain more than the gradual unfolding of reason. From this vantage point, conceptual change proceeds through conceptual battles between competing political projects, and as a result, certain concepts and meanings prevail while others fade from view or become less consequential.

Contestation, opposition, and struggle all illustrate how conceptual politics is also unavoidably about power. Dominant understandings of concepts reflect, and help reinforce, certain hierarchies and relations between different actors. In a Weberian vein, the political sphere can be seen as a realm of conflict, and it is through this lens that the use of concepts can be viewed (Palonen 2003: 48). Basic concepts are never neutral, objective arbiters or measures, they are unavoidably bound up in power dynamics and infused with values. This has direct relevance for thinking about the processes by which certain meanings of democracy are emphasized, while others have been silenced or overlooked.

Concepts matter, they influence and shape real-world outcomes, which means that the contestation surrounding them carries weight. This contestation can occur between or within a concept, either in terms of how it is normatively valued or what it describes (Skinner 2002: chap. 8). Over time, left is a graveyard of concepts and conceptualizations, as contestation results in some meanings surviving and becoming dominant, with the majority expiring into disuse. Formulations that do not speak to the political context in which they appear are likely doomed for irrelevance. This offers an important reminder: while it is valuable to be open to a plurality of meanings of a concept, there is a need to appreciate how these intersect with politics. Not all conceptions are equally meaningful, and it is analytically necessary to identify which ones have been more impactful.

To summarize this discussion: basic concepts play a pivotal role in the constitution and re-constitution of our world, with the nature and outcome of the contestation surrounding them being of fundamental importance. Concepts are neither objective nor epiphenomenal. They are shot through with meaning and value, and denying this can itself be a

powerful way of engaging in conceptual politics. Conceptual and political change are closely intertwined, and one consequence of this is that some conceptualizations will prove more successful because they better facilitate agency and advance political projects than others. The outcomes of past struggles and formulations also helps inform what is conceptually and politically possible.

It follows that studying concepts in this manner is grounded by certain empirical and normative claims. The empirical proposition is that conceptual politics are consequential. This has been demonstrated by scholars, including John Boswell and Jack Corbett (2021), Christopher Hobson and Milja Kurki (Hobson 2017; Hobson and Kurki 2011; Kurki 2012), Frederic Schaffer (2014), and Laurence Whitehead (2002), whom all illustrate how being more attuned to contestation surrounding democracy's meaning leads to important insights about democracy's place in contemporary politics. The normative claim is that it is valuable to recognize and engage with the contestation that surrounds basic concepts, but this should be sharpened by reflection on "which of democracy's problems are most pressing and tractable and which must remain more distant ideals" (Sabl 2015: 357). Balancing these empirical and normative commitments means being open to different concepts and conceptions, while also be attuned to which ones have mattered more and how the diachronic momentum of conceptual change shapes present politics and future possibility.

The Language of Democracy

That we now speak the language of democracy and seek to identify different instances of it is both a consequence, and a powerful example, of conceptual politics at work. Returning to Charles de Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), he identified three main political forms, what might now be described as ideal types: republican, monarchical, and despotic (Montesquieu 1989). Reflecting on this influential formulation, Hannah Arendt observed:

These three forms of government—monarchy, republicanism, and tyranny—are authentic because the grounds on which their structures are built (the distinction of each, and impotence) and from which their principles of motion spring are authentic elements of the human condition and are reflected in primary human experiences. (Arendt 1994: 338)

From Montesquieu's trinity, democracy has assumed the mantle of republicanism and, with it, the expression of equality translated through

popular rule. If one were to take any of Montesquieu's forms and go hunting through history, it is likely a diverse range of examples could be identified. Yet today few are interested in searching for forgotten forms of monarchy or digging out lost experiences of despotism, as these regimes have little political or normative support, and so it is for marginalized meanings of democracy we go searching.

That democracy is normatively valued, and different conceptions of it are considered worthy of examination, is a reflection of its historical trajectory and the present political context. John Dunn offers the reminder that, "the honorific prevalence of democracy in modern political speech is a historical product" (Dunn 2007: 5). For much of its past, the basic concept of democracy, along with all its different possible permutations, was marginalized and dismissed (Dunn 2005). The legacy of ancient Athens weighed heavily, dragging the concept into disuse and political irrelevance. From the late eighteenth through to the early twentieth centuries, democracy emerged as a modern political force, and as part of this process, underwent a period of conceptual change and re-evaluation (Hobson 2015). It was normatively revalued from negative to positive and descriptively revised from direct to representative.

Fundamental to this process was the reconciliation of democracy and liberalism, two doctrines that had long been considered incompatible (Zakaria 2007). How this occurred involved democratic compromises and closures, and there were other ways that the liberal and democratic components could have been reconciled and combined (Parekh 1992). Nonetheless, restricting its more radical potential helped to make democracy politically viable and normatively acceptable for the liberal order developing. As I have observed elsewhere, "Before Woodrow Wilson sought to make the world safe for democracy, there had been an earlier process of democracy being made safe for the world" (Hobson 2015: 138). Discarding direct rule in favor of representation made it feasible in the context of the nation-state, while developments in constitutionalism and the rule of law made it more compatible with the emergent logics of individualism and capitalism.

Even if we accept that there were powerful political, economic, and social forces pushing in the direction of popular forms of government, this in itself was not enough to determine that the outcome would be defined in reference to democracy, and not another concept. This can be seen by considering how democracy effectively superseded and replaced republicanism, another doctrine closely connected to popular rule. This alternate route has largely been forgotten, but at the end of the eighteenth century, republicanism was the dominant framework for thinking about popular power. If one were to return to the founding of the United

States, one would see that the meaning of republicanism was greatly contested, while the meaning of democracy largely accepted, because at that moment, republicanism was politically significant and central (Bailyn 1967; Pocock 1975), whereas democracy was regarded as outdated and largely irrelevant.

Had Tocqueville published his famous study fifty years earlier, it most likely would have been titled, *Republicanism in America*. In this sense, his work both announced and reflected the conceptual transition occurring, through which democracy was becoming the basic concept describing the version of popular rule that was emerging. A vital part of this transition was democracy coming to be liberal democracy, entailing representative rule, individual and property rights, political parties, and other defining features that still persist today. The liberal model offered a much less demanding form of popular rule than what republicanism called for, and it was much better suited for the modern conditions of states that were far bigger in size than Swiss cantons. The outcome of this conceptual contestation in the first part of the nineteenth century, which was closely connected with political projects in Europe and the United States, was one in which democracy would emerge as the basic concept for popular rule, while republicanism would largely fall into disuse and irrelevance.

A conceptual politics approach is one that traces the historical trajectory of democracy coming to be revalued and redescribed through the development of the liberal democratic model, along with an appreciation of the messy, complex legacies of these processes. The word that is used is democracy, and that word *does* have a specific history; it *does* come from somewhere. Democracy is traced back to the ancient Greek word *dēmokratia*, which conveys that the people (*dēmos*) rule; they hold and exercised power (*kratos*) (Sealey 1973). Regardless of how historically accurate this close association might be, it was the experience of those city-states that long dominated how democracy was thought about. Well into the nineteenth century Athens remained “the immediate antecedent and model of modern democracy” (Canfora 2006: 47). It is valuable and necessary to continue globalizing our histories of democracy, and to consider other experiences of popular rule. In doing so, however, it is important not to lose sight of the centrality of ancient Athens in shaping the trajectory of the concept that prevails today.

In a parallel fashion, liberal democracy has specific roots that are hard to avoid. The theoretical, conceptual, and institutional architecture of liberal democracy, as it presently exists and imperfectly functions, is a historical product that has primarily emerged through Western ideas and practices, most notably in the Anglosphere and Europe. It has subsequently been expanded, extended, and revised as the model and the

practices associated with it have spread across the globe. Yet there has been remarkable continuity in the basic outlines of its key institutions (Manin 1996). It is important to appreciate that the liberal model of representative, state-based democracy is one that does have a history and more specific origins. In the rush to avoid “‘bad universalism’ by still employing concepts and norms rooted from Western historic experiences” (Weiss 2020: 27), there is a need to be careful not to veer to the opposite extreme and engage in bad history.

Acknowledging the Western roots of the dominant liberal democratic model is not to discount its many silences and harms. Quite the opposite, it is a way toward further investigating these darker sides and developing a more balanced, nuanced account. For instance, a significantly understudied part of liberal democracy’s past is the dynamic that existed between democratization in Europe being facilitated by conquest and colonization abroad (Hobson 2015: 135–137). Greater liberty and equality within Europe came at the expense of the freedom and security of people in Africa and Asia. Moreover, extreme settler violence and extensive land appropriation are foundational and fundamental parts of the histories of some of the most longstanding and stable liberal democracies. Considering two of the worst examples, Michael Mann reflects, “America and Australia were democratic for whites but murdered millions. Murderous ethnic cleansing, amounting at its worst to genocide, was central to the liberal modernity of the New World” (Mann 2005: 108). Rather than trying to quickly dispense with concepts that have deeply problematic histories, or effectively denying these complicating features, there is a need to more directly engage with these legacies and consider how they might shape contemporary understandings and practices. Doing so creates space for recognizing a much more ambiguous and uneven trajectory for liberal democracy, one that has brought both freedom and oppression, peace and violence, openings and closures, all in ways that are not easy to disentangle.

Experiences with popular rule are much wider than that found in Western democracies, likewise democratic theory is much more global than what the traditional canon would suggest. It is vitally important to continue expanding and globalizing our knowledge. Not only is this more in keeping with values of equality and pluralism, it leads to a richer and deeper understanding of democratic pasts and present possibilities. On this point, Teivo Teivainen has called for “constructing North-South relations based on the democratic principle of learning together rather than on one-sided pedagogical domination,” noting there is much that can be gained from a more respectful form of dialogue and equal engagement (Teivainen 2009: 165). It should not have required the election of

Donald Trump for some scholars to acknowledge that the United States could benefit from considering democratic experiences elsewhere (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Indeed, this still contains the one-sided pedagogy that Teivainen critiques, only now the South is seen as a site for negative lessons about democratic retrenchment and failure. Keane instead calls for work on the “indigenisation of democracy,” which entails “the manifold complex ways in which the language and institutions and normative ideals of democracy undergo mutations when they are carried more or less successfully into unfamiliar environments” (Keane 2018: 8). Considering marginalized meanings of democracy is part of this enterprise, but it should be tethered to the conceptual and political conditions of the present moment. Doing so means unavoidably grappling with liberal democracy, which continues to play a central role in determining the ideational and institutional context in which democracy is understood and practiced.

Liberal Democracy and its Futures

If the last millennium ended with widespread confidence and hope in the future of liberal democracy, the first decades of this century have been defined by increasing doubts and fears. In their introduction, the editors are explicit in their hope that, “by paying attention to these marginalized conceptions of democracy we contribute to the contemporary struggle against the ‘march of authoritarianism[s].’” This is a laudable aim and there are valid reasons to be concerned, yet when it comes to democracy, doubt is never far away. Now it is people like Timothy Snyder and Yascha Mounk building their profiles on the back of democracy’s woes, a generation earlier *The Crisis of Democracy* report crystalized fears about democracies becoming unworkable, with one of the lead authors, Samuel Huntington, mistakenly suggesting in 1984 that, “with a few exceptions, the limits of democratic development in the world may well have been reached” (Huntington 1984: 218). Debate about democracy’s waning fortunes and uncertain future were also prominent in the 1930s and 1940s (Lepore 2020), more understandable given this was when it was most at risk. Indeed, there were reasonable grounds for concern at each instance, but perhaps there always are, the siren call of crisis is seductive.

Doubts about democracy seem never to be far away, with memories of the last crisis soon being superseded by another portentous threat. As David Runciman observes, “no matter how successful in practice and over time, democracies have always been full of people worried that things are about to go wrong, that the system is in crisis and its rivals

are waiting to pounce” (Runciman 2013: xi–xii). This dynamic remains ever-present. Having now collectively survived the Trump presidency and Brexit, the handwringing accompanying these shocks appears even more overwrought than it did at the time. Rather than appreciating democracy’s durability, attention immediately turns to the next great problem it might fail to manage, whether that be COVID-19, climate change, economic inequality, and so on, the list is long. This is not to deny these challenges; they are all formidable, especially when combined. Nonetheless, liberal democracy has a habit of being much more resilient than the doomsayers would care to admit.

Can searching for marginalized meanings of democracy help address the latest round of troubles? This enterprise might hold less promise than the editors hope insofar as “our systems of thought are limited by the categories we call up” (Bashovski 2019: 86–87). The historical trajectory and contours of a concept do not determine how it can be revised or used, but it does create a certain momentum and path dependency that strongly indicates what type of conceptual challenges and revisions are feasible. Using the language of democracy means drawing on a concept that has been strongly shaped by historical legacies, ideational frames, and institutional practices that might not be so easy to wrestle free of. To take the example of Joel Olson’s critical account, *The Abolition of White Democracy*, the mild solution proposed is appending another descriptor to create “abolition democracy.” Olson argues that, “one of the advantages of analyzing democracy and race as mutually constitutive is that . . . it provides new ways of imagining what democracy is and could be” (Olson 2004, xvii). Yet if democracy is so closely intertwined with oppression and racial injustice, how viable can this process of reimagining be? Given that the linkage between democracy and slavery can be traced back to ancient Athens, that the development of European democracy was closely tied to imperialism, and that settler democracy was built on the back of widespread violence against indigenous populations, there are solid grounds for thinking that democracy is effectively contaminated by injustice and oppression, and as such, a different concept is needed. This example is illustrative of the conceptual stranglehold that democracy continues to hold over the way we think and talk about popular forms of rule. It is easier to formulate “abolition democracy” than it is to abolish democracy as the frame of reference.

Arguably a much more ambitious program would be to try to identify and consider alternate forms and experiences of popular rule on their own terms, using different concepts, wriggling free from the conceptual pull of democracy. In this regard, a distinctive contribution is presented by Patrick Deneen, who offers a roots and branch critique of liberalism

(Deneen 2019). Rather than reimagining or reformulating, he argues that the problem is liberalism itself, which means it “may be a moment for more than mere institutional tinkering,” as “we may rather be witnessing an increasingly systemic failure, due to the bankruptcy of its underlying political philosophy, of the political system we have largely taken for granted” (Deneen 2019: 17). Deneen’s work stands out for its boldness; it suggests what genuine conceptual contestation might look like: arguments that use different language, that draw on different legacies, that move beyond concepts that might be limiting the breadth of our vision. In a Schmittian vein, it could be the case that clearly demarcating and opposing concepts, making distinctions and drawing boundaries, might actually be more productive. If the aim is breaking free of the Western confines of democracy, might not this be better served by looking much further and instead proposing other conceptualizations of popular rule? Endlessly adding descriptors flattens out meaningful difference, while deadening and limiting alternatives, as thought remains trapped within the conceptual web of democracy.

An alternate route is the more obvious and immediate one, which commences from the recognition that liberal democracy remains the dominant form; it is still the baseline and benchmark. Moreover, it provides the context within which much work on democracy takes place. As Keane observes, “research on democracy remains mostly an affair of the WEIRD world: societies that are by global standards Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and nominally Democratic” (Keane 2018: 6). While Keane rightly notes this leads to a limited awareness of democratic experience and thought elsewhere, it is also worth identifying another consequence, namely, that liberal democracy provides the conditions that allow most scholars of democracy to think, work, and live. Reminiscent of the “what have the Romans ever done for us?” scene in Monty Python’s *Life of Brian*, it can be easy to take for granted the considerable benefits that liberal democracy delivers, admittedly in an increasingly incomplete and uneven manner.

Bypassing Whiggish claims and pushing aside the hubris of unreflective liberals, there remain strong grounds for arguing that liberal democracy offers important political goods, creating conditions that have facilitated economic growth as well as broadly positive developments in society and culture more effectively than other real-world alternatives. Robert Dahl, one of the most influential democratic theorists of the twentieth century, provided a rather convincing summary of some of the desirable consequences of this form of rule: “(1) avoiding tyranny; (2) essential rights; (3) general freedom; (4) self-determination; (5) moral autonomy; (6) human development; (7) protecting essential personal interests; (8)

political equality; (9) peace-seeking; (10) prosperity” (Dahl 1998: 45). This is not to deny the many problems, shortcomings, and silences associated with this regime type, but it would be a mistake to easily overlook the considerable, if incomplete, achievements of liberal democracy.

Better appreciating the goods that liberal democracy provides, along with acknowledging its confounding resilience, should not make us sanguine about its prospects. The mounting array of challenges piling up on liberal democracy’s doorstep are becoming increasingly difficult to step around. In Runciman’s recent book, provocatively entitled *How Democracy Ends*, he identifies three main factors that have changed liberal democracy’s odds at successfully enduring: the corrosive effects of subversion and conspiracy, growing catastrophic risks, and rapid and unchecked technological developments (Runciman 2018). In this rendering, liberal democracy is increasingly ill-equipped and incapable of functioning effectively in the world we are moving toward, but if it does fail or transform, it is likely to do so in ways different from the standard template provided by democratization studies. It is worth noting, however, that many of the most intractable problems facing liberal democracies are hardly unique to them. The COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, economic inequality, inter-generational tensions, immigration and borders, rapid technological transformation, and societal dislocation are issues all states are facing. Recognizing this, liberal democracies – for all their faults and failings – might still be better equipped to deal with many of these issues than other major forms of rule. Moderation and flexibility have been valuable traits when dealing with previous problems, and these offer some hope for the array of challenges liberal democracies are facing.

Liberal democracy has shown a remarkable capacity for muddling its way through. Alasdair Roberts suggests, “in history’s long view, liberal democracy’s decisive advantage over other forms of government lies in its capacity for reinvention,” and the current “malaise may be a sign that a process of democratic reconstruction is under way” (Roberts 2016: 21). Indeed, this is precisely what Runciman beautifully captured in his earlier work, *The Democracy Trap*, in which he detailed how liberal democracy has continually managed to stumble its way to a measured kind of success (Runciman 2013). Liberal democracy has proven durable and adaptable, and it has demonstrated a greater capacity to provide important political, economic, and social goods on a more consistent and sustained basis in more settings than most alternatives. This is not insignificant.

Returning to the First Inaugural Address of Franklin D. Roosevelt, his description of the American constitution is one that could be extended more generally to liberal democracy: “so simple and practical that it is possible always to meet extraordinary needs by changes in emphasis and

arrangement without loss of essential form” (Roosevelt 1933). There will presumably be a point in time when this no longer holds, but in the same way that liberal optimism was excessive in the 1990s, perhaps now the pessimism is overly extreme. Either way, thinking through democracy’s present positioning and potential futures means carefully reckoning with the liberal model.

Conclusion

The future of democracy appears differently according to the concept of democracy we adopt. (Luhmann 1990: 46)

The language we use for democracy matters, the struggles over how it is defined are real, the outcomes are consequential. As Niklas Luhmann observed, what concept of democracy is adopted influences how one conceives of present challenges and future possibilities. Basic concepts play pivotal roles in political projects, enabling and conditioning agency, helping shape what can be achieved. In developing a conceptual politics approach, this article has offered a reminder of how contestation and power – the stuff of politics – informs considerations over democracy’s different meanings. Gagnon notes that “democracy’s words lie scattered across the world. They are mostly unknown and forgotten” (Gagnon 2021). From the perspective that conceptual politics provides, many of these conceptions are unknown and forgotten for good cause; they did not speak to political questions posed by that historical moment.

Certain marginalized meanings might have the potential to be relevant, but to do so, they would need to be activated, taken up, and used. The value added of simply digging up and presenting dusty concepts is far from clear. Indeed, if there is a kind of power law at play with democracy, a handful of conceptions matter much more than all the rest combined, and focusing on these will likely prove more productive. And among all the different meanings of democracy that exist, it is liberal democracy that stands at the center, it has effectively won conceptual and political battles resulting in its current primacy, it is fundamental in shaping the contemporary conditions of possibility for democracy. In this sense, liberalism is much more deeply baked into contemporary discussions and thinking about democracy than some might be comfortable admitting. Moreover, this is not without cause, liberal democracy has achieved, and continues to unevenly provide, important political, economic, and social goods.

The basic concept of democracy simultaneously conveys something deeply aspirational – the ideal of people governing themselves in a

manner that promotes freedom, equality, and peace – while also suggesting something much more mundane – the messy day-to-day of politics, an uneven blend of contestation, compromise, and cooperation. Likewise, the high-minded conception of liberal democracy as a way of balancing the rights of the individual with the will of the majority is translated into the flawed reality of representative rule, professional politics, and excessive capitalism coming together to offer a tawdry approximation of popular government. How these normative and empirical components fit together often results in considerable confusion and miscommunication. The manner in which Hans Kelsen formulated this point in 1929 is still applicable today:

In arguments over democracy, a lot of misunderstanding is repeatedly created by the fact that one side only talks about the idea, while the other side only talks about the reality of this phenomenon. The two sides disagree because neither manages to capture the phenomenon in its entirety, whereas ideology and reality must be understood in reference to one another. (quoted in Urbinati 2014: 234)

This dynamic between the normative and empirical is directly relevant for thinking about how to identify and study democracy in the world, to map out where and how it has been practiced and presently exists. For the comparativists, there is the question of determining whether to rely on a minimalist definition in the Schumpeterian tradition or adopt a fuller meaning that incorporates a wider range of political and civil rights. Once this decision has been made, however, it is then relatively straightforward to move to identifying cases and developing data sets, as there has been a considerable degree of institutional stability in liberal democracy over approximately the last century and a half. Yet what is missed is the extensive conceptual contestation surrounding democracy's value and meaning during the same period. In itself, this is not necessarily a cause for concern, as simplification and abstraction are unavoidable steps in breaking the entirety of the world into comprehensible pieces. Moreover, doing so has proven remarkably productive in developing our knowledge about where liberal democracy can be found in the world and how it functions. It becomes more problematic when there is a failure to recognize this analytical trade-off and accept the inability of empirical approaches to democracy to "capture the phenomenon in its entirety," to recall Kelsen's words (*ibid.*).

It is here that the conceptual politics approach offers a powerful reminder of how contestation over the meaning and value of basic concepts plays a significant role in shaping the political and social world. Recognizing this, the cost of stabilizing and fixing democracy's meaning is higher

than comparativists tend to realize. In this regard, John Boswell and Jack Corbett have recently explored how even the most sophisticated empirical approaches, such as the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project, are ultimately unable to fully account for the conceptual and normative variability of democracy. The authors suggest that, “rather than being a problem that political science must overcome, conceptual ambiguity is a key resource for democracy. Projects like V-Dem would, therefore, be better served by serious engagement with normative and interpretive studies” (Boswell and Corbett 2021: 242). This sentiment closely matches with the argument presented here, and made elsewhere (Hobson 2017). Greater openness and engagement between normative and empirical approaches to democracy holds the promise of improving our understanding, advancing debates, and opening up new questions, all of which take on more importance if democracy’s position does weaken further (Boswell and Corbett 2021; Sabl 2015).

Considering the special issue’s themes, it seems appropriate to conclude with one of the many descriptions of democracy from the Borgeian list assembled by Gagnon, specimen number 833: gray democracy (Gagnon 2018a). This is an obscure term, it has been rarely used, and that is unlikely to greatly change; it is not going to win any conceptual battles, nor does it need to, as it is effectively a synonym. It comes from Adam Michnik, who pairs democracy with the “beautiful” color of gray (Demenet 2001: 184–85). In this rendering, democracy is neither black nor white (nor red, white, and blue); it is not defined by absolutes. Rather, it is the ambiguity and textured shades of gray that represents the “mixture of sinfulness, saintliness, and monkey business” that one finds in a democracy (Demenet 2001: 184). Much like humans themselves, this form of rule is capable of inspiring both hope and despair, showing some of the best traits that define us and equally some of the worst. This is not a “perfect society that’s free of conflicts” but one that allows for “a conflictual society in which conflicts can be resolved within the rules of the democratic game” (Wilson 2015). As Michnik paints gray upon gray, it is an uneven picture of liberal democracy that takes shape, a “patchwork of compromise and good sense” (Michnik 2007: 83). Marginalized meanings of democracy might have their allure, but at a moment when liberal democracy’s hues look faded and tired, and more striking colors might catch the eye, one should not overlook the radical radiance of gray.

Liberal democracy, with all its flaws and failings, represents the uneven and uncertain approximation of a vision about how people can rule themselves in a way that promotes a degree of freedom, prosperity, and equality in a world marked by contingency, folly, and violence. Much of its value lies in moderation, avoiding the dangerous excesses of other

regimes, while possessing an uneven but vital capacity for self-correction. It contains within it both an optimism and arrogance that is necessary – that things can be different, people can work together – but also a strong sense of fallibility – that mistakes are made again and again, and there need to be measures for addressing them. Michnik observes, “a democratic world is a chronically imperfect one” (Demenet 2001: 182); it could not be any other way. The end result of liberal democracy might not always seem that inspiring, and a dark side is unavoidably present, but still, there is something remarkably human and humane to it.

Acknowledgments

With sincere thanks to Milja Kurki and Piki Ish-Shalom, whose engagement and support have played an important role in the development of the ideas presented in this article.

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